

AlbertMohler.com

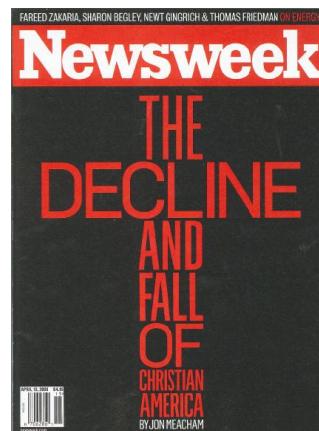
# Newsweek — The End of Christian America

Monday, April 6, 2009

"To the surprise of liberals who fear the advent of an evangelical theocracy and to the dismay of religious conservatives who long to see their faith more fully expressed in public life, Christians are now making up a declining percentage of the American population."

Thus writes *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham in this week's cover story, "The End of Christian America." The image on the front cover says it all, declaring "The Decline and Fall of Christian America" in type set to form a cross.

The cover story is a serious consideration of the issue *Newsweek* set as its priority for the week of Easter, and the seriousness of the magazine's approach is evident in the fact that its editor, Mr. Meacham, wrote the cover story himself. The essay, elegant in form and serious in tone, demands attention.



I read Jon Meacham's essay with no small amount of personal interest, for Mr. Meacham had talked to me as he was writing the article. Here is how his essay begins:

*It was a small detail, a point of comparison buried in the fifth paragraph on the 17th page of a 24-page summary of the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey. But as R. Albert Mohler Jr.—president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the largest on earth—read over the document after its release in March, he was struck by a single sentence. For a believer like Mohler—a starched, unflinchingly conservative Christian, steeped in the theology of his particular province of the faith, devoted to producing ministers who will preach the inerrancy of the Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the only means to eternal life—the central news of the survey was troubling enough: the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent. Then came the point he could not get out of his mind: while the unaffiliated have historically been concentrated in the Pacific Northwest, the report said, “this pattern has now changed, and the Northeast emerged in 2008 as the new stronghold of the religiously unidentified.” As Mohler saw it, the historic foundation of America’s religious culture was cracking.*

I do remember that moment quite well, and I expressed my thoughts in an article posted March 27, "The Eclipse of Christian Memory." The increasingly secular character of New England, now surpassing even the Pacific Northwest, is a portrait of Christianity in retreat. The course of this retreat has been long. Indeed some historians would trace the secular trend in New England to the period of the Revolution itself. In the minds of at least some New Englanders, King George was not the only authority dethroned in that generation.

Still, the region remained under the influence of Christian memory and, for most of the intervening decades, under the influence of the Christian worldview. Now, New England is the most secular region of the nation, representing a model of what I believe is rightly designated post-Christian America.

Mr. Meacham picked up on this description of the pattern, and *Newsweek* launched a cover story. A good portion of the essay deals with my argument and a consideration of its accuracy and significance. Without doubt, *Newsweek* considers the pattern to be of great significance — thus the cover story. Mr. Meacham looked at the same data that had caught my attention, the American Religious Identification Survey [ARIS] and the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious

Landscape Study. His summary response to the post-Christian designation: “There it was, an old term with new urgency: *post-Christian*. This is not to say that the Christian God is dead, but that he is less of a force in American politics and culture than at any other time in recent memory.”

Here is the essence of Jon Meacham’s analysis:

*While we remain a nation decisively shaped by religious faith, our politics and our culture are, in the main, less influenced by movements and arguments of an explicitly Christian character than they were even five years ago. I think this is a good thing—good for our political culture, which, as the American Founders saw, is complex and charged enough without attempting to compel or coerce religious belief or observance. It is good for Christianity, too, in that many Christians are rediscovering the virtues of a separation of church and state that protects what Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island as a haven for religious dissenters, called “the garden of the church” from “the wilderness of the world.” As crucial as religion has been and is to the life of the nation, America’s unifying force has never been a specific faith, but a commitment to freedom—not least freedom of conscience. At our best, we single religion out for neither particular help nor particular harm; we have historically treated faith-based arguments as one element among many in the republican sphere of debate and decision. The decline and fall of the modern religious right’s notion of a Christian America creates a calmer political environment and, for many believers, may help open the way for a more theologically serious religious life.*

This is a fair and insightful rendering of the pattern. What does become clear in this paragraph is that what *Newsweek* sees as the essence of the issue is political influence. While this is hardly a non-issue, my greater concern is not with political influence and what secularization means for the political sphere, but with what secularization means for the souls of men and women who are now considerably more distant from Christianity — and perhaps even with any contact with Christianity — than ever before. My main concern is evangelism, not cultural influence.

One key aspect of Mr. Meacham’s argument is his suggestion that what binds America together is not “a specific faith” but instead “a commitment to freedom” and, in particular, freedom of conscience. There is something to this argument, of course. The founding generation did not establish the young republic on any religious creed or theological doctrine. Still, there is something missing from this argument, and that is the recognition that freedom, and freedom of conscience in particular, requires some prior understanding of human dignity and the origins of conscience itself. Though the founders included those who rejected the Christian Gospel and Christianity itself, Christianity had provided the necessary underpinnings for the founders’ claims.

Mr. Meacham also suggests that this new situation is perhaps healthy for the church. To this extent I agree — the church gains a necessary knowledge any time the distinction between the church and the world is made more evident. Our first concern is and must be the Gospel. It is good that non-Christians know that they are not Christians and that Christians be reminded of that fact that what sinners need is the Gospel of Christ, not merely the lingering morality of the Christian memory.

I am haunted a bit by this section of the *Newsweek* article:

*Mohler posted a despairing online column on the eve of Holy Week lamenting the decline—and, by implication, the imminent fall—of an America shaped and suffused by Christianity. “A remarkable culture-shift has taken place around us,” Mohler wrote. “The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. The so-called Judeo-Christian consensus of the last millennium has given way to a post-modern, post-Christian, post-Western cultural crisis which threatens the very heart of our culture.” When Mohler and I spoke in the days after he wrote this, he had grown even gloomier. “Clearly, there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative, that is animating large portions of this society,” he said from his office on campus in Louisville, Ky.*

I appreciate the care, respect, and insight that mark this essay by Jon Meacham. I also appreciated our conversation about an issue that concerns us both. Still, I hope I did not reflect too much gloom in my analysis. This much I know — Jesus Christ is Lord, and His kingdom is forever. Our proper Christian response to this new challenge is not gloom, but concern. And our first concern must be to see that the Gospel is preached as Good News to the perishing — including all those in post-Christian America.

---

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.